

What Is Enlightenment?

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Preface

Let me start by offering a warm “hello” to everyone reading this is essay, which covers some of the core points of my book, ***Living the Paradox of Enlightenment***. Enlightenment is the living and loving heart of our ancient nondual wisdom, and while this wisdom has been around for thousands of years, only a few people have a clear idea of what it really is. This is why I want to share my opinion about this fascinating topic with all of you who have a sincere aspiration to have this wisdom come alive within you. So without any further ado, let's move on to the essay.

Introduction

My most passionate teaching offers you the idea that you exist in the most fundamental way as pure awareness, as the open capacity for experience. We have all heard it said that you are not a human being having a spiritual experience, but instead, you are a spiritual being having a human experience. While that shift in understanding is of course very important, there is still a deeper wisdom. In truth, you are not a being of any kind, physical or spiritual. You are pure awareness! And most importantly, this awareness is the Divine Awareness, the only reality that was not created. This Divine Awareness is the source of all of creation and it is the only witness to it. *This is your true fundamental self and this Source-Awareness is looking out of your eyes right now!*

Being fully awake to the correct understanding of your True Self as the One Divine Awareness is the first aspect of enlightenment, which is a set of conditions, not an experience or a state of being. The second aspect is the complete liberation from all selfish or self-centered tendencies, often called egocentric binding likes and dislikes. These two aspects work together to automatically produce the unhindered flow of all the “divine virtues” such as loving kindness, compassion, peace, humility, generosity, patience, and a divine bliss that holds all human emotions. This is the fruit of enlightenment and it becomes an unlimited basket of fruit that you share with everyone, including yourself.

The first aspect of enlightenment seems to arise somewhat suddenly, usually through a series of awakening experiences, while the second aspect unfolds slowly through gradual cultivation, usually over many lifetimes. This was noted long ago in the Chan (Chinese), Seon (Korean) and Zen (Japanese) traditions. Both aspects unfold at the same time, it's just that the first aspect seems to have some stairsteps while the second aspect is more like a ramp. Although these awakenings do not immediately produce complete liberation, it will eventually lead to it.

Of course all healthy spiritual traditions have loving kindness and compassion as their primary guiding light and this is also true of our ancient nondual wisdom. This path of self-discovery is most fruitful when traveled with a wholesome spiritual aspiration that is full of a gentle passion, yet completely devoid of any unhealthy selfish concerns for how enlightenment will benefit the personal self. There is no desperate seeking of anything, including enlightenment. Humility is a necessary ingredient and once you awaken to the core truth of who you really are, this humility will become even deeper.

That's quite a bit to start with so let's back up a little and ask, "What is personal consciousness?"

What Is Personal Consciousness?

If you take a bite of some delicious food, you will taste it but I will not. Since I cannot directly sense your physical sensations, feel your emotions, see your thoughts, remember your memories, and so forth, it seems logical to say that we each have our own personal consciousness, separate and distinct, and this is indeed what the nondual tradition accepts as an apparent reality. Yet there is another important "layer" to this reality.

While it seems like it is this personal consciousness that perceives our world, in truth, your personal consciousness is blind; it perceives nothing. Yet it provides a unique and dynamic point of view used by the One Awareness. Only this Awareness has the power to perceive. *What we think of as our personal power of perception is actually the sentience of the One True Self sensing the world through the viewpoint offered by the personal consciousness.*

The ancient texts of India refer to the personal consciousness as the "jiva" and my mentor, Timothy Conway, also translates this as the soul or "the viewpoint." All four terms mean the same thing. Timothy emphasizes that your personal consciousness is certainly not a limited or smaller version of this Absolute Awareness, with a diminished or restricted power of perception. Again, it has no sentience of its own; it is like a window and a window cannot see anything.

Your body provides a window into our physical world. At birth, the window of your soul overlapped with the window provided by your body and this combination offered a new perspective into the world. The One Awareness looks through the combination of the two windows. When you drop the body at death, the One Awareness will still be looking through the window of your soul into the spiritual realm.

What was created when you were born was not a new sentient being, but a new viewpoint from which the One True Self perceives the world. This has been happening ever since you were born and it is happening right now. What is commonly thought of as your own personal sentience is really the One Divine Awareness looking out through your own eyes, as I mentioned before.

Imagine you are the One Awareness and that you are in a room with many windows. When you look out into the world through one of these windows, you see a certain view. In this way, you have all the experiences of one particular person. You see what they see, feel what they feel, think what they think, remember what they remember, dream what they dream and so forth. When you look through a different window, you have all the experiences of another person. But you are still the same Awareness; this has not changed in any way.

If you experienced all of these perceptions altogether through one big window, it would be just a huge jumble of color, noise and so forth. Our individuated personal consciousnesses or windows are what allow the One Awareness to have all the experiences of billions of different people without it being one big, messy overlay. This is how the One becomes the many.

By the way, drugs and alcohol affect the body and the brain but not the Awareness. If someone is drunk, this window becomes unclear or distorted but the Awareness still has perfect 20/20

vision, so to speak. So while this Awareness is not affected at all, the overall experience is much different.

Although your personal consciousness (your soul) does not depend upon your body in any way, it uses the body to create that razor sharp feeling of being present in our physical world as a human being with a physical body. It feels like your body is an integral part of you because your personal consciousness permeates your body. Imagine a driver not only getting into a car but also infusing himself or herself into every single atom of the car. When you add to this the One Awareness looking out through the viewpoint of the body and soul, you get the extremely vivid experience that tricks you into falsely believing that you are a separate, mortal, sentient, physical being. You certainly do not appear to be divine in any way.

While many people have heard that the world is an illusion, few people have heard that they also are an illusion. But please don't misunderstand me. This "personal self" is most certainly real as an extremely vivid ongoing experience, but this is a deceptive reality, an illusion. You are being tricked into believing the false idea that you are fundamentally a separate, mortal, sentient, physical being, rather than this pure Divine Awareness. Since all good illusions are persistent, under normal states of consciousness, it will always seem as if you are fundamentally this "sentient being." But now you will know that this is just a misleading experience, an illusion. This "personal self" is your functional identity, rather than your fundamental identity.

Your personal consciousness associates with your body and it is this association that can be temporarily released during an out-of-body experience. At that time, it associates with your astral body and a similar thing happens during a dream when it associates with your dream body.

In the past, I have used the metaphor about people being hand puppets through which the True Self expresses itself and experiences creation. How good is this metaphor? Well, I think it's pretty good but it might leave you puzzled since you know without a doubt that you are not a hand puppet. You know that when you choose to pick up a pencil, it feels like it is you who evaluates your choices, decides what you want to do, and then initiates and completes the action. Picking up the pencil does not feel like it is out of your control. There is no sensation of your arm being controlled by a different entity, a higher force, or a higher mind. You never feel like shouting out, "Hey, leave me alone and let me do my own thing!"

Well, it feels like you move your arm because you, as the True Self, do move it. The True Self moves everything while your personal self moves nothing. But since you cannot see the formless True Self and you can only see your body, it seems like you are the body-mind and that your body-mind is autonomous. Ah, but in reality, you are the puppet master and you have mistaken the puppet as you. The puppet master and the puppet are blended together so closely that the puppet master is looking right through the eyes of the puppet. Your personal "self" is the powerless puppet while your True Self is the grand puppet master, the One Self that arises as all apparent "selves." The person is an inert yet dynamically animated puppet but you are not the puppet; you are not the person in a fundamental way.

By the way, recognizing that you are not fundamentally the person does not stop the sense or experience that makes it seem like you are, just like the recognition that the sun does not go around the earth does not stop the sense that it does. The sense that you are the person may

lessen in its intensity, and it may seem more like you are witnessing the events of “your” life rather than having them happen to “you” as the person. But this sense of being the person is really there to provide some functionality so it won’t disappear completely except in deep dreamless sleep and in the formless trance state of samadhi.

Just as your personal consciousness provides a unique but limited perspective that the One Unlimited Awareness uses to perceive the world, your body provides a unique but limited puppet that the One Unlimited Power animates within the world. The puppet is limited but the Power is not.

So your personal self is not really a “self” in the true sense of the word since it is not your fundamental identity. It is also not autonomous. It is not the source of what appears to be its own will or power. It is not the source of what appears to be its own sentience. This is why I think that it is so important to clearly point out that you have only one self – this fabulous Divine Source-Awareness – even though I still use the phrase “personal self” in my writing and conversations.

Some people talk about a regular self (the body-mind) and a higher self (the soul), and in a way, this can be helpful. But again, neither of those are really a self in the true sense of the word. They each exist as a collection of phenomena that together make up the human being that we call “me,” which appears to be an autonomous entity, but is really only an animated puppet. Some sages simply call it the false self.

Now let’s carefully consider another similar metaphor, the one of an actor playing the role of a fictional character. Of course there’s a difference between the actor and the character since the actor is the source of the character. The character does not have any power of its own so it never does anything; only the actor can make the character seem to do anything.

The character is not real in the same way that our ordinary reality is real. Our ordinary reality is the larger framework that holds the fabricated story of the play, which has its own context or framework. The bigger framework holds the smaller one. Within the context of the play, the character is valid and meaningful but it is only fictional in the context of our ordinary reality. Note that I am not saying that the character is not real. I am only saying that the character is a fabrication. Yet the actor is not a fabrication. The actor permeates the character and transcends the character while the audience overlooks the actor and accepts the character.

Now suppose the actor becomes so totally absorbed in his role that he too completely overlooks who he really is and instead, just thinks that he is only the character. This is what we have in our world. The One invisible Actor is playing all the roles yet it is hiding from itself by pretending to forget what is really going on. But you cannot really hide yourself from yourself and you will not pretend to forget forever.

The One Awareness is always aware of everything yet the personal self only seems to be aware of its own ever-changing experience. The One Mind is thinking all thoughts yet the personal self appears to be thinking only its own thoughts. The One Self is sensing all sensations yet the personal self appears to be sensing only its own sensations. But the limited perspective of the personal self only exists as an ongoing experience in the world of form, in this divine dream, this spectacular “play of consciousness.” The One Awareness is the unchanging witness of all

experiences; the personal self witnesses and experiences nothing.

This formless Source-Awareness is unchangeable and therefore it cannot become happy or sad in a fundamental way yet it can animate an inert puppet in a way that exhibits the qualities of happiness and sadness. This fabulous Awareness – your True Self – creates the experience of what seems like a separate individual person living his or her own life. This is such a delightful paradox. You are one-hundred percent Divine and simultaneously, you are playing as a person that is one-hundred percent human.

Through the mystery of creation, the One seems to come forth as the many. When we celebrate both our uniqueness in form and our unity in our Divine Essence, we have the balance that completely opens our loving heart. Everyone and everything is fully divine and it is only through the many that the One Love of God can be expressed.

This Divine Awareness is the buried treasure hidden within the personal self; it is the kingdom of heaven within you.

Your “personal self” appears to be your body, mind, and soul, but your True Self – your fundamental, unconstructed self – is this Divine Awareness that perceives everything that you experience. This is why I like to repeat an old saying: *“Know yourself and you shall know God.”*

Mainstream science holds that the material qualities and chemical processes of the body and the brain give rise to our power of perception. In other words, the material world is the foundation of reality, and sentience is a byproduct that comes forth from specially organized matter, and this allows all sentient beings to be alive and aware.

But what if it's the other way around? What if your awareness is fundamental? What if your awareness is unconstructed and everything else is created within this?

Genuine in-depth scientific research into subjects such as out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, spirit communication and past lives all point to a nature of reality that is profoundly different from the materialistic view of mainstream science. This research shows us that while there is a relationship between our personal consciousness and our body, the body is not the source of our consciousness. The true nature of the self is beyond the body. Of course we all see that our bodies were born into the world; this is beyond dispute. But is it not also true that both our bodies and the entire world are born into our awareness?

Our amazing awareness itself is not even visible to us and yet we know it exists because we experience the world through it. Our awareness holds everything that we experience. Our awareness hosts our entire personal reality. Everything that you experience, physical or spiritual, arises out of your awareness and is witnessed by your unchanging awareness.

And a sage carries this even further. They understand that the awareness that looks out of your eyes is the same awareness that looks out of their eyes. What is seen is different but the awareness is the same. There is only One Awareness and this formless, unseen, Divine Awareness is what animates all of life.

All of this brings us back to this intriguing question of enlightenment.

What Is Enlightenment?

Although there is no universally accepted definition of enlightenment, here are the two key criteria that I use:

- 1) ***Being fully awake*** to the intuitive understanding of your True Self as this One Divine Source-Awareness, the One Self that arises as all apparent selves and
- 2) ***Being completely free*** from all selfish or self-centered desires and tendencies, which are sometimes called egocentric binding likes and dislikes.

As I mentioned in the beginning, these two aspects work together to automatically produce the unhindered flow of all the divine virtues such as loving kindness, compassion, peace, humility, generosity, patience, and a divine bliss that holds all human emotions. In this way, the personal consciousness becomes a well-tuned instrument in the hands of God sharing the fruit of enlightenment with everyone. So we see that being fully awake and being completely free leads to being entirely available for God.

I have heard some people say that in order to awaken spiritually, you need to have your heart win its battle with your mind. But please consider this. Your mind holds ideas, and your heart holds emotions. Your mind can hold true ideas or false ideas, and your heart can hold hatred and fear, or love and peace. There is no battle where your heart must triumph over your mind. Instead of a battle, think of it as the pursuit of truth, love and peace. Work towards tuning your mind into the truth and your heart into love and peace. Both of these are done by the grace of God and it is only God that brings forth enlightenment.

Enlightened people do not battle with their mind or try to keep it in a perpetual state of minimum thought or mindfulness. Instead, they use it wisely in different ways at different times. While it is true that the full understanding of these deep spiritual teachings does indeed extend beyond the mind, there is a cognitive component that can be well articulated and held by the mind. These well articulated ideas will help purify your mind and open your intuition since both your mind and your intuition can be fully engaged with this wisdom, which ultimately comes from the One Divine Mind. So let's not make our minds the enemy especially since you cannot function in the world without one. And, by the way, the purer the mind, the more loving the heart.

A similar thing can be said about the ego. There is no need to erase the ego, as some people seem to think. First of all, very quickly, what is the ego? Well, your ego is simply your sense of your own personal self – your understanding of who you are as a person and how you fit into the world – and an ego is surely required for you to function in society, just like your mind.

So we see that the false ideas that are held by the mind (not the mind itself) along with the resultant fear, selfishness and self-centered tendencies that are integrated into the personal consciousness (not the ego itself) are what lead to so much suffering. I can assure you that God did not create you with a built-in enemy or an intrinsic source of problems.

Being emotionally accepting of everything in your life is what moves you smoothly down the road. This means that you do not have a strong negative emotional charge about what you don't prefer. The more okay you are with yourself, the world and how you fit into it, the farther down the road you move. Eventually you will have an awakening about who you truly are. This cannot be avoided and it will come to you at the "proper" time, although it may not happen in this lifetime.

Being emotionally accepting of everything that flows into your life does not mean you should just sit back and accept everything that happens without doing anything to make things better, especially with regards to injustice. If you come upon someone being robbed or hurt, you should try to stop the perpetrator from doing more harm, if possible. They may even have to be put in jail for rehabilitation (not punishment) and this should be done without anger or hatred. The point is that you can "glow with the flow" of life while being open to opportunities to make the world a better place. You do this in your own unique way by following your own wholesome inspirations.

You cannot obtain enlightenment by your own doing. It is something that comes to you from God at a time when the Divine Will brings it forth. What you apparently do, whether it is meditation, prayer, or any of a number of other spiritual practices, is done through you and for you in a way that prepares you for your awakening. You can even live without any special spiritual practices. You do not need to go to a teacher in order to hear special talks or receive special energy, although that may happen. Certainly attending Timothy's satsangs helped me. He sometimes suggests that people use an ancient three step process: hear the Truth, ponder the Truth and meditate on the Truth. Trust that whatever is appropriate for you will arise without fail. This Absolute Reality is the only real teacher and this is always offering you precisely what will help you the most and you cannot make a mistake, no matter what you do.

Now let's get to the key paradox of enlightenment. The One Self polishes up the personal consciousness and creates an enlightened person, but that person is just a character (not an actor) in the play of form. It is not a self; it is not really you in any fundamental way. So *you* do not become enlightened but *it* becomes enlightened. If you think of yourself as a person (or soul) who has awakened, the personal consciousness is still holding a false idea. You are not fundamentally a person. There is indeed a person and that person may indeed be awake, but the person is not a self; it is not fundamentally you.

The body can be asleep or awake; the personal consciousness can be asleep or awake, but the True Self is Awakeness itself! When the personal consciousness is asleep, it holds the idea that it is an autonomous being. When it is awake, it holds the idea that it is an inert collection of phenomena that is animated by the True Self.

Enlightenment is the highest and purest set of conditions available for the soul but enlightenment is not a quality of the formless Awareness. This fundamental, unconstructed Awareness is "unimprovable, cannot regress, need not be purified, cannot be liberated, and need not be awakened," as Timothy often reminds us. This is what enlightens all souls, but Awareness itself cannot be or become enlightened. Source-Awareness is enlightening, but not enlightened. So the True Self has never moved down any road; it is the soul that moves down the road.

Even after the personal consciousness awakens to the True Self, there will still be more polishing of the personal consciousness since awakening is not full enlightenment. And even after the personal consciousness becomes perfectly polished – completely free from all egocentric binding likes and dislikes, as the Buddhists say – you will still be active in the world with a healthy, unselfish ego, sharing the divine virtues of loving kindness and compassion with everyone you encounter.

How enlightened someone might be is not really that important of a question since everyone is where the hand of God places them in each and every moment. Yet if I were to ask myself how enlightened a particular spiritual teacher is, I would look at how much compassion and kindness they have for everyone, not how many people they can draw into a weekend retreat. But I would also look at what they teach.

For example, some teachers emphasize the common misunderstanding that there is no Self at all or that “there is no one here.” There most certainly is “someOne” here; God is here! The One Self of all apparent selves is arising as you and me and “everyOne.” When this is overlooked, the most profound stimulus for genuine loving kindness will be missing.

This is why Timothy so often tells us that this Source-Awareness is “supra-personal,” rather than impersonal, which is another common misunderstanding. This word “supra-personal” emphasizes that God lives as every person by creating, permeating, animating and transcending each and every person. This is why there is so much richness in our relationships when we share the One Love of God.

This question of who is best qualified to teach deep spiritual principles reminds me of the Bible verses found in 1 Corinthians 13:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

So it is no surprise that these divine virtues are the guiding light for every genuine teacher and these virtues will be spontaneously expressed more and more through you as this spiritual wisdom unfolds within you.

Well, I have given you much to ponder. If you are inspired, please take some time to really sit with these ideas. Yes, the core of this goes beyond the mind, yet as I mentioned earlier, immersing your mind in these ideas can help deliver that which is beyond the mind. Perhaps your earnest curiosity in this matter will bring you some wonderfully marvelous surprises. Perhaps sooner rather than later, you – the One who truly lives all lives – will witness another person living the paradox of enlightenment.

Thanks for reading my essay! In truth, I honor your divine nature, Thomas Razzeto

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